

The Creation of an Independent Agricultural Press
in the Antebellum North

Ariel Ron
Southern Methodist University

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This essay argues that the rise of an independent agricultural press in the antebellum North produced important shifts in government policy. The case is somewhat circumstantial, in part because manuscript sources for key figures appear to be lacking. But there is enough evidence and logic to the situation to make cautious speculation worthwhile because, despite some very recent work in this area, we still do not know much about how specifically agricultural interests gained political expression in the antebellum era. Since agriculture constituted the better part of the period's economy and farmers the majority of its electorate, this is a gap that needs addressing. But apart from farmers' centrality, the story of the agricultural press suggests more general consequences flowing from the period's deluge of print discourse.

The outlines of the case are this:

Immediately before and after the Panic of 1819, several northern states enacted subsidies for agricultural societies. The timing of these subsidies along with contemporary rhetoric suggests that they were understood as part of a broad economic recovery program to develop the northern home market. However, most states rescinded public aid after a few years due to the agricultural societies' perceived elitism and ineffectiveness.

Two decades later, a seemingly similar scenario played out. When financial crises in 1837 and 1839 brought depression, elections swung to the Whigs and northern states again began sponsoring agricultural societies in order to promote economic recovery and development. This time, however, there was no subsequent backlash. Instead, agricultural societies established highly successful local and state fairs that quickly emerged as basic institutions of rural society. What had changed?

Between 1819 and 1837, an independent farm press emerged. Like the societies and fairs, agricultural journals became fixtures of rural life. These media substantially broadened the constituency for agricultural reform and provided essential means for lobbying state government. From this point forward, public financial aid to agriculture expanded continuously and almost never shrank. Government at the state and federal level took on increasing responsibility to promote agricultural reform and improvement, culminating in the founding of several state agricul-

tural colleges, passage of the Morrill Land Grant Act, and creation of the Department of Agriculture. Thus the appearance of the agricultural press marked the difference between the abortive program of the 1820s and the institutionalization of the program of the 1840s.¹

To trace the rise of the agricultural press, I use a contracted version of Jeffrey Pasley's editor-biography method.² Commonalities in the career trajectories of several important agricultural editors reveal two key patterns. First, most agricultural editors began their careers in political journalism. In fact, a few were among the group of Democratic-Republican editors studied by Paisley. These editors carried a paradoxical legacy from their political work. On the one hand, they insisted on casting agricultural reform as entirely separate from partisan politics. On the other hand, their political connections and experience made them effective lobbyists. Even as they argued that agriculture was above "politics," by which they meant partisanship, they successfully politicized agriculture at another level.

The second pattern among editors is a little hazier but equally significant. The agricultural press emerged within a segmenting print market that created new tranches of distinct reading publics. The experiences of a few editors suggest how this market segmentation occurred and with what effect. The editors turned their attention toward farming as a distinct occupation, way of life, and identity. Their perspectives were deeply ideological, even tendentious, but they conjured a new agricultural public that could ground a set of authoritative claims about the country's farming future. These claims then echoed through the larger public sphere, where they could be received as either expert testimony or the seemingly transparent representation of farmers' desires. Coupling nonpartisan rhetoric with effective lobbying in order to mediate between farmers and the public, the editors began to develop a kind of popular interest-group politics we usually associate with later periods of American history.

By recognizing that agricultural journals helped institutionalize a specific vision of state-sponsored rural modernization, we can also begin to recognize significant interstitial spaces

¹ For some recent work on the importance of this institutionalization, see Gabriel N. Rosenberg, *The 4-H Harvest: Sexuality and the State in Rural America* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015); Jess Carr Gilbert, *Planning Democracy: Agrarian Intellectuals and the Intended New Deal* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015); Daniel Immerwahr, *Thinking Small: The United States and the Lure of Community Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015); Alan L. Olmstead and Paul W. Rhode, *Arresting Contagion: Science, Policy, and Conflicts over Animal Disease Control* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

² Jeffrey L. Pasley, "The Tyranny of Printers": *Newspaper Politics in the Early American Republic*, Jeffersonian America (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001), 13, 320 and throughout.

within a northern public sphere that we tend to regard as suffused by party organizations and the religiously inspired associations of the “Benevolent Empire.” Put differently, because the farm press reveals a site where economic ideology took shape, gained influence, and conditioned the long-term trajectory of American agriculture, politics and government, it suggests that the antebellum “communications revolution” had complicated and still underexplored consequences.³ To understand these effects we will need to link discursive with institutional analysis. In suggesting some ways to see the rhetoric of agricultural reform as co-constituted with institutional arrangements, I attempt here to begin to connect discursive and institutional structures that are often treated in separate historiographies.

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The very first agricultural societies formed toward the end of the colonial era, modeled on similar organizations in Britain. Perhaps only a handful existed before the American Revolution, but within about a decade after independence several dozen were active. Composed of “monied gentry” types accustomed to directing political and economic affairs, these groups aimed to improve American agriculture by importing the methods and often the organisms of the European agricultural revolution. They initially focused on disseminating technical information about farming by publishing occasional volumes of essays. In the 1810s, however, several innovated by holding agricultural fairs where improvement could be demonstrated, not just discussed. Ordinary farmers responded enthusiastically to the new fairs. For the first time, the societies tasted genuine popularity.⁴

³ On the “communications revolution,” see especially David Henkin, “Howe Forum: Henkin on the ‘Communications Revolution,’” *H-SHEAR*, November 10, 2008, <http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx>; Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). For an older take, see Robert G. Albion, “The ‘Communication Revolution,’” *American Historical Review* 37 (July 1932): 718–20, doi:10.2307/1843336.

⁴ For “monied gentry,” see John Lauritz Larson, *Internal Improvement: National Public Works and the Promise of Popular Government in the Early United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), chap. 1. For early agricultural societies and fairs, see Donald B. Marti, *To Improve the Soil and the Mind: Agricultural Societies, Journals, and Schools in the Northeastern States, 1791-1865* (Ann Arbor, MI: Published for the Agricultural History Society and the Dept. of Communication Arts, New York State College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, Cornell University by University Microfilms International, 1979); Donald B. Marti, *Historical Directory of American Agricultural Fairs* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986); Mark Mastromarino, “Fair Visions: Elkanah Watson (1758-1842) and the Modern American Agricultural Fair” (Ph.D. diss., College of William and Mary, 2002); Wayne Caldwell Neely, *The Agricultural Fair* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1935); Rodney Howard True, “The Early Development of Agricultural Societies in the United States,” in *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for 1920* (Smithsonian Institution Press, 1925).

Elite leadership and newfound popularity allowed the societies to make effective claims for various forms of public aid. By 1818, several states were offering subsidies. New York went furthest, creating a state Board of Agriculture with a stupendous \$10,000-a-year budget. Then the Panic of 1819 hit and the economy seemed to slide off a cliff. Surprisingly, however, states did not reduce aid. Far from retrenching, New York extended the Board of Agriculture for another four years in 1820, pledging \$40,000 of state monies in the midst of the worst depression on record. That same year Pennsylvania, hitherto laggard, began agricultural subsidies for the first time. Thanks to this aid, agricultural societies multiplied and fairs expanded throughout the North.⁵

The societies also became prominent venues for articulating a National Republican program of economic recovery through government-sponsored development of the domestic market. Internal improvements formed one pillar of this program. More surprisingly, given the focus on agriculture, the tariff formed another.⁶ In a series of pamphlets and talks directed at farmers, Mathew Carey maintained that the era of high European demand for American farm products had ended permanently and that commodity prices would remain depressed unless the domestic economy was rebalanced by expanding the manufacturing sector.⁷ George Tibbits argued the same point before the New York Board of Agriculture in his precisely titled “Memoir on the Expediency and Practicability of Improving or Creating Home Markets for the Sale of Agricultural Productions and Raw Materials, by the Introduction or Growth of Artizans and Manufacturers.”⁸ Similarly, Nicholas Biddle wrote to friends in the Philadelphia agricultural society that farmers could “by their own efforts retrieve the loss of the foreign markets” if they simply supported an

⁵ Donald B. Marti, “Early Agricultural Societies in New York: The Foundations of Improvement,” *New York History* 48 (October 1967): 320–21; Simon Baatz, “Venerate the Plough”: *A History of the Philadelphia Society for Promoting Agriculture, 1785-1985* (Philadelphia: The Philadelphia Society for Promoting Agriculture, 1985), 40. For the Panic of 1819, see Murray Newton Rothbard, *The Panic of 1819: Reactions and Policies* (Ludwig von Mises Institute, 1962); Clyde A. Haulman, *Virginia and the Panic of 1819: The First Great Depression and the Commonwealth* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2008).

⁶ Albert Lowther Demaree, *The American Agricultural Press, 1819-1860*, Columbia University Studies in the History of American Agriculture 8 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1941), 32, 75; Donald B. Marti, *To Improve the Soil and the Mind: Agricultural Societies, Journals, and Schools in the Northeastern States, 1791-1865* (Ann Arbor, MI: Published for the Agricultural History Society and the Dept. of Communication Arts, New York State College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, Cornell University by University Microfilms International, 1979), 131, 147.

⁷ Gautimozin (Mathew Carey), *The Farmer's and Planter's Friend*, nos. 1-7 (1821); Mathew Carey, *Address Delivered Before the Philadelphia Society for Promoting Agriculture, at Its Meeting, on the Twentieth of July, 1824* (Philadelphia: Mifflin & Parry, 1827).

⁸ George Tibbits, *Memoir on the Expediency and Practicability of Improving or Creating Home Markets for the Sale of Agricultural Productions and Raw Materials, by the Introduction or Growth of Artizans and Manufacturers* (Albany: Packard and Van Benthusen, 1825).

adequate tariff.⁹ Agricultural societies throughout the Northeast made similar cases for a turn to protectionism.¹⁰

Wool occupied a special place in this program, in part because woolens had played such a key role in European economic development since the Middle Ages, in part because nothing better united agricultural and industrial interests. Moreover, the countryside was crowded with fine-wool merino sheep leftover from the “merino mania” of 1807 to 1811. Thus in 1820, a series of essays in the *American Farmer* argued that farmers could finally turn their merinos to account by supporting a tariff-protected domestic woolens industry. “Let not the American Farmer think these are matters, with which he has no concern,” the author warned. “He is as deeply interested in them, as any other in the community.” Two years later a committee of the Bucks County (PA) Agricultural Society encouraged farmers to expand their flocks now that “our manufacturing establishments are increasing with stability.” Members of the Berkshire County (MA) Agricultural Society argued the same thing.¹¹

But just as the agricultural societies seemed poised to take a leading role in rural economic development, they faced a devastating public backlash. In 1823 Theodore Sedgwick warned of “a lurking jealousy and ill will toward these societies” as a result of their tendency to attract “the more opulent farmers.” It did not help that the prizes offered for top-notch crop and livestock specimens, the central feature of every agricultural fair, kept going to the wealthiest farmers. In some cases, society members seem to have practiced outright fraud by distributing

⁹ N.B. [Nicholas Biddle] to Walter Lowrie, 22 Feb 1822, Records of the Philadelphia Society for Promoting Agriculture (Ms. Coll. 92), Van Pelt Library Manuscripts and Special Collections, University of Pennsylvania. Biddle appears to have sent nearly identical letters to James Monroe (22 Feb 1822), Mathew Carey (4 Feb 1822) and several others, including the agricultural reformer James LeRay de Chaumont (4 Feb 1822).

¹⁰ *Rural Magazine and Farmer's Monthly Museum* 1 (Feb 1819): 25; *American Farmer* 2 (9 Jun 1820): 83; *Agriculturist's and Manufacturer's Magazine* 1 (Jan 1820): 16, 18-21; *Memorial of the New York County Agricultural Society*, H. Doc. 28, 16th Cong., 2nd Sess. (Washington, December 15, 1820), 6, Serial Set Vol. No. 48, Session Vol. No.1; Donald J. Ratcliffe, *The Politics of Long Division: The Birth of the Second Party System in Ohio, 1818-1828* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2000), 59; Reeve Huston, *Land and Freedom: Rural Society, Popular Protest, and Party Politics in Antebellum New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 55; Rothbard, *The Panic of 1819*, 218; William Frederic Worner, “Agricultural Societies in Lancaster County,” *Historical Papers and Addresses of the Lancaster County Historical Society* 34 (1930): 278–80.

¹¹ *American Farmer* 1 (1819): 247; other articles in the series appear on pp. 206, 214, 216, 230, 272; “Report of the Committee on Domestic Manufactures,” dated 28 Jan 1822, in volume entitled “Communications to the Agricultural Society of Bucks County,” p. 197 (BM-B-428), Mercer Museum and Library, Doylestown, PA; *Memorial of the Berkshire Agricultural Society of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts: January 22, 1821. Referred to the Committee on Manufactures* (Washington: Gales & Seaton, 1821); Mark Mastromarino, “Fair Visions: Elkanah Watson (1758-1842) and the Modern American Agricultural Fair” (Ph.D. diss., College of William and Mary, 2002), 207, 310–11. For “merino mania,” see Arthur H. Cole, “Agricultural Crazes: A Neglected Chapter in American Economic History,” *American Economic Review* 16 (December 1926): 622–39; Harold F. Wilson, *The Hill Country of Northern New England: Its Social and Economic History, 1790-1930* (New York: AMS Press, 1967), 88–94.

prizes among themselves. Such revelations soon led state legislatures to reverse course and eliminate agricultural subsidies entirely. Without public aid, many societies withered and disappeared. Others persevered, but the movement as a whole appeared moribund.¹²

Meanwhile, however, a few agricultural journals had begun to appear. Although the farm press did not really take off until the 1830s, historians usually date its advent to 1819, when John S. Skinner established the *American Farmer* in Baltimore and Solomon Southwick the *Plough-boy* in Albany. In fact, an earlier effort bears mention.

In 1813 the Massachusetts Society for Promoting Agriculture (MSPA) began publishing the *Massachusetts Agricultural Journal*. Part innovation, part continuation of old practices, this move foreshadowed but could not quite realize the promise of the new agricultural press. The MSPA had been founded in 1792 by some of Boston's leading citizens.¹³ It soon established an agricultural library and published several volumes containing "many communications . . . of practical value." It also attempted to make connections beyond its patrician membership. In 1799 and 1800 it circulated a lengthy questionnaire on farming practices, establishing ties with smaller agricultural societies in Middlesex, Worcester and Kennebec. Roughly a decade later another circular inspired the formation of "numerous town societies." This encouraged the MSPA to embark on its *Journal* with the hope of opening "a channel of communication between the several Agricultural Societies in the Commonwealth, and between individual farmers."¹⁴ Unfortunately, the society blotted its efforts at popular engagement with almost reflexive condescension. "Gentlemen of leisure and intelligence" would issue advice, the *Journal* assured, and farmers would receive it "with thankfulness."¹⁵

¹² *New England Farmer* 2 (31 Jan 1824): 212, quoted in Donald Benedict Marti, "Agrarian Thought and Agricultural Progress: The Endeavor for Agricultural Improvement in New England and New York, 1815-1840" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 1966), 101-2; Marti, *To Improve the Soil and the Mind*, 22-31; Demaree, *The American Agricultural Press, 1819-1860*, 200-201; Baatz, *Venerate the Plow*, 42-46.

¹³ Tamara Plakins Thornton, *Cultivating Gentlemen: The Meaning of Country Life among the Boston Elite, 1785-1860* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); Massachusetts Society for Promoting Agriculture, *Centennial Year, 1792-1892, of the Massachusetts Society for Promoting Agriculture* (Salem, MA: Salem Observer Office, 1892), <http://www.archive.org/details/centennialyear1700massrich>.

¹⁴ Massachusetts Society for Promoting Agriculture, *Centennial Year*, 7, 28-32; Massachusetts Society for Promoting Agriculture, *Inquiries by the Agricultural Society* (Boston: Young & Minns, 1800), <http://www.archive.org/details/inquiries-byagric00mass>; Marti, *To Improve the Soil and the Mind*, 11. A still earlier agricultural journal, the *Agricultural Museum*, existed briefly from 1810 to 1812; see Claribel R. Barnett, "'The Agricultural Museum': An Early American Agricultural Periodical," *Agricultural History* 2 (April 1928): 99-102.

¹⁵ *Massachusetts Agricultural Journal* 3 (Nov 1813): iii-v.

The MSPA seemed to be laboring under an essentially outdated understanding of the print public sphere. Although it sought to enlist the efforts of ordinary farmers with “no claim to literary distinction,” its reliance on the pre-existing social channels of its elite membership meant that it inevitably reached only the “highly respectable.” Moreover, the *Journal* was really a serialized version of the old essay anthologies rather than a true periodical. Its very first issue was numbered volume three. It lacked a standard format. It typically ran to a hundred pages of rather learned prose. In short, it seemed more a continuation of existing practice than a fresh departure. At best, then, it represented a transitional medium. Indeed, its editor, John Lowell, saw himself as belonging to “a *middle* generation, between the revolutionary patriots, & the *modern* man.”¹⁶

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The “modern men,” in this case, were the agricultural editors who followed. Most of these cut their teeth as partisan political printers. The *Ploughboy* was founded and edited by Solomon Southwick, at one time a leading Democratic-Republican newspaperman known especially as a talented prose stylist. Brought low by a rhetorical intemperance that lost him the state printership while earning him a record-setting libel judgment, Southwick shifted attention from politics to agricultural reform. To appeal to a popular audience, he adopted the pen name Henry Homespun, striking a folksy note while subtly invoking reformers’ fixation on domestic woollens manufacturing. The gesture may have proved too cute. Despite support from the New York Board of Agriculture—or perhaps because of it—the journal failed within a few years.¹⁷

Jesse Buel and Luther Tucker, two influential pioneers in agricultural journalism, also began their professional lives as political printers. Buel edited several political newspapers before coming to Albany in 1813. There he founded the *Argus*, which became the state’s leading organ of Martin Van Buren’s Bucktail organization and secured him the state printer’s contract (the one

¹⁶ *Massachusetts Agricultural Journal* 3 (Nov 1813): v, 46; Lowell quoted in Thornton, *Cultivating Gentlemen*, 137 (emphasis in original).

¹⁷ For Southwick’s libel suit, see Pasley, *The Tyranny of Printers*, 279. My accounts of Southwick and the other agricultural editors discussed in the succeeding paragraphs are based on the following sources: *American National Biography Online*; ACLS, *Dictionary of American Biography*; Demaree, *The American Agricultural Press, 1819-1860*; Marti, *To Improve the Soil and the Mind*; Marti, “Agrarian Thought and Agricultural Progress”; Donald B. Marti, “Agricultural Journalism and the Diffusion of Knowledge: The First Half-Century in America,” *Agricultural History* 54 (January 1980): 28–37; George F. Lemmer, “Early Agricultural Editors and Their Farm Philosophies,” *Agricultural History* 31 (October 1957): 3–22; Gilbert M. Tucker, *American Agricultural Journals: An Historical Sketch* (Albany, NY: printed privately, 1909), <http://archive.org/stream/americanagricul00tuckgoog#page/n14/mode/1up>. Additional sources noted where relevant.

Southwick had lost). This helped make Buel rich, but it also put him in an awkward position. As a Bucktail spokesman, he was required to attack DeWitt Clinton. Yet Buel strongly believed in agricultural reform, a cause associated with Clintonian development policy and the state Board of Agriculture reviled by small-government Van Burenites. This forced Buel into contorted pro-reform, anti-Clinton positions. At last he left the *Argus* and devoted his time to agricultural improvement. Within a few years he had built up a famously productive farm in the “Sandy Barenens” west of Albany and earned himself a reputation as a leading agricultural expert. During the 1830s he began to write widely on agricultural subjects, helped edit Luther Tucker’s *Genesee Farmer* and then, with Tucker as publisher, founded and edited the *Cultivator*, which quickly became the country’s most influential farm journal.¹⁸

Tucker, like Buel, came from a New England farming background, learned his trade as a printer’s apprentice, and escaped a life of rural poverty through ambition and autodidacticism. In 1826 he founded the Rochester *Daily Advertiser*, reputedly the first daily newspaper west of Albany. The paper was the city’s Van Burenite mouthpiece, edited by the rising Jacksonian star, Henry O’Reilly. Although Tucker and O’Reilly were capable partisans, they tangled to their misfortune with the young Thurlow Weed, who proved a better partisan still. In 1828 O’Reilly took a skeptical position on the Morgan Affair that Weed was pushing vigorously in the pages of his *Anti-Masonic Enquirer*. Weed not only came off better in the pitched editorial battle that ensued, he saddled Tucker and O’Reilly with a libel suit that hung over their heads for more than a decade. O’Reilly was so shaken by the affair that he left Rochester and briefly forsook political life. Tucker stuck it out, but he began to take more interest in agricultural reform than in politics, leading to his venture with the *Genesee Farmer*. When Buel died in 1839, Tucker sold his political paper, moved to Albany, and took over the *Cultivator*, which was eventually merged into other Tucker agricultural journals. By the 1840s he was one of the most important figures in American agricultural reform, publisher not only of the high-circulation *Country Gentleman*, but of the *Horticulturist*, which was edited by the much admired arbiter of rural taste, A.J. Downing. Simultaneously, Tucker served for many years as the New York State Agricultural Society’s

¹⁸ In addition to the sources cited in note _____, see Jesse Buel, *Jesse Buel, Agricultural Reformer: Selections from His Writings*, ed. Harry J. Carman (Ayer Publishing, 1972).

treasurer and recording secretary. During these years, moreover, he trained the editors of no less than ten agricultural papers.¹⁹

Others also made the move from political to agricultural journalism. Several were among the Jeffersonian printers who worked to expand political participation for white men during the early national period. These included both Buel and Southwick. Another was Isaac Hill, a pugnacious editor and Democratic Party powerbroker who founded the *Farmer's Monthly Visitor* after serving as governor of New Hampshire. Luther Tucker had once been a journeyman in Hill's shop. Similarly, Samuel Sands, who took over the *American Farmer* in 1834, and Simon Brown, who edited the second iteration of the *New England Farmer* in the 1850s, began as apprentice printers during early national battles over the role of newspapers in politics. Almost alone among pioneer agricultural editors, Thomas Green Fessenden of the first *New England Farmer* was not a printer, though he too engaged in political journalism (as a rather unsuccessful anti-Jeffersonian polemicist).²⁰

The political background of these editors is important for several reasons. Most of them had spent time as early national Republicans rhetorically committed to democratization. They carried that sensibility over to agricultural journalism. Within the gendered and racialized confines of what became Jacksonian democracy, they sought an open and inclusive public sphere, bringing the idealized model of enlightened inquiry down to ground level. Thus they vowed to eschew "the unintelligibility of technical science" in order to present "interesting and useful facts . . . in the unstudied attractions of native plainness." They also asked their readers "to become *correspondents* and send us the results of their experience and observations in farming." Whereas the older agricultural societies had assumed distinct roles for gentlemen, on the one hand, and ordinary farmers, on the other, the new farm press presented agricultural reform as the common project of an undifferentiated agricultural mass public.²¹

¹⁹ There are few secondary sources on Tucker beside his entry in the ALCS, *Dictionary of American Biography*; for obituaries, see *Maine Farmer* 41 (8 Feb 1873): 1; *Massachusetts Ploughman* 32 (8 Feb 1873): 1; for an earlier biographical sketch, see *New England Farmer* 7 (Jan 1855): 28; for Weed's libel suit, see Glyndon G. Van Deusen, "Thurlow Weed in Rochester," *Rochester History* 2 (Apr 1940): 18; Dexter Perkins, "Henry O'Reilly," *Rochester History* 7 (Jan 1945): 3-5.

²⁰ *Farmer's Monthly Visitor* 1 (20 Dec 1839): 184; "Death of Samuel Sands," *American Farmer* 10 (1891): 175; for Brown and Fessenden, see entry in ALCS, *Dictionary of American Biography*.

²¹ *New York Farmer* 1 (Jan 1828): 1; *Ohio Cultivator* 1 (1 Jan 1845): 1; *Farmer's Monthly Visitor* 1 (20 Aug 1839): 124. See also Emily Pawley, "'The Balance-Sheet of Nature': Calculating the New York Farm, 1820-1860" (Ph.D., University of Pennsylvania, 2009), 64-65.

What agricultural editors *did not* carry over from party politics mattered as much as what they did. The experience of intense partisan conflict seems to have left some editors with a bad taste, or at least a determination to draw a firm distinction between party politics and agriculture. In this way they reaffirmed gentlemanly agricultural reform conventions that they had disavowed with their democratizing rhetoric. Early national patrician reformers often thought of agriculture as an escape from the “vortex of politics” into the peaceful repose of “rural retirement,” where they could experience the harmony of the countryside’s supposed organic social order.²² Editors invoked something of this tradition by appealing to nonpartisanship, nationalism and rural norms of communal consensus. Hence the fierce partisan Isaac Hill opened the first issue of the *Farmer’s Monthly Visitor* with a letter from a political rival pledging that “in this thing you shall have my hearty cooperation.” As the *American Farmer* urged, “let politicians quarrel for place or principle, but let all unite in agricultural exertions.”²³

“Rural retirement” was not, of course, a simple withdrawal from politics. It was a studied performance of protest, transcendence and love-of-country that drew on the “agrarian patriotism” of eighteenth-century English country Whigs, who regarded agricultural improvement as a means of national and imperial regeneration.²⁴ Agricultural nonpartisanship in the antebellum United States likewise shifted rather than abandoned the political ground. Demarcating the category of the political is itself a political act. When agricultural editors and their correspondents defined the technologies, policies, and values they associated with rural progress as matters of common sense rather than of political contention, they established a discursive base from which to demand that the political system respond to farmers’ ostensibly objective needs. They soon found occasion to do exactly that.

But before picking up this story, we have to consider a second key aspect of early agricultural editorship: the segmentation of the print market. A number of factors converged in the decades after the American Revolution to vastly expand the American reading public. Among these were postal policies that subsidized newspapers and expanded mail access, rising rates of

²² Thornton, *Cultivating Gentlemen*, 43–55; Mastromarino, “Fair Vision,” 82–89; Marti, “Agrarian Thought and Agricultural Progress,” vi–viii, 15–16; Demaree, *The American Agricultural Press, 1819–1860*, 78–79.

²³ *American Farmer* 1 (May 1819): 64; *Farmer’s Monthly Visitor* 1 (15 Jan 1839): 1.

²⁴ My thanks to Richard Drayton for calling my attention to this connection. C. A. Bayly, *Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World, 1780–1830* (London: Longman, 1989), 121–26, 155–60; Richard Harry Drayton, *Nature’s Government: Science, Imperial Britain, and the “Improvement” of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 88; Andrea Wulf, *Founding Gardeners: The Revolutionary Generation, Nature, and the Shaping of the American Nation* (New York: Knopf, 2011).

literacy and general education, and the emergence of a middle class for whom reading formed a way of life. As the market grew larger, it also grew more specialized. New genres of periodicals that simultaneously appealed to and conjured up discrete reading publics began to appear: religious papers, women's magazines, the flash press, agricultural journals, etc.²⁵

The *American Farmer's* John S. Skinner was well positioned to grasp these changes, even though, unusually among antebellum agricultural editors, he had never been a printer. In many respects, Skinner resembled the elite reformers who preceded him. Born to a Maryland planter family, he enjoyed the social standing to climb a ladder of government offices before venturing into agricultural journalism. An early appointment made him inspector of mail during the War of 1812, later he became postmaster of Baltimore, and finally he rose to third assistant postmaster general in the Harrison and Tyler administrations. Due to the close association between journalism and the post office during this era, Skinner's work gave him an insider's view of print market segmentation. At a time when religious magazines were just beginning to carve out their own niche, he may have perceived opportunity in the popularity that fair-holding agricultural societies achieved during the 1810s. Socially connected and culturally savvy, he scored an immediate hit with the *American Farmer* and later pioneered sports journalism with the *American Turf Register and Sporting Magazine*.²⁶

Commercial developments within the print market, however, were only one part of the story. The agricultural sector grew more complex in the early 1800s as nurseries, seed stores, fertilizer dealers, and implement manufacturers competed for farmers' attention. Unlike country merchants who dealt in general supplies, these firms sought to market agricultural producer inputs rather than consumer goods. As the commercial vanguard of agricultural improvement, they

²⁵ Richard R. John, *Spreading the News: The American Postal System from Franklin to Morse* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); David M. Henkin, *The Postal Age: The Emergence of Modern Communications in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2006); Paul Starr, *The Creation of the Media: Political Origins of Modern Communication* (Basic Books, 2005); Richard Burket Kielbowicz, *News in the Mail: The Press, Post Office, and Public Information, 1700-1860s*, Contributions in American History, no. 138 (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989); Carl Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780-1860* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983); William J. Gilmore, *Reading Becomes a Necessity of Life: Material and Cultural Life in Rural New England, 1780-1835* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989); Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).

²⁶ Harold T. Pinkett, "The 'American Farmer,' a Pioneer Agricultural Journal, 1819-1834," *Agricultural History* 24 (July 1950): 146–51; Demaree, *The American Agricultural Press, 1819-1860*, 23–38. For Skinner's use of social connections, see Skinner to Richard Wistar, 24 Apr 1819; Tm. F. Redding "for JS Skinner" to unknown, 22 Sep 1821; N.B. [Nicholas Biddle] to Skinner, 17 Oct 1821, Papers of the Philadelphia Society for Promoting Agriculture (MS Coll. 92), Van Pelt Library Manuscripts and Special Collections, University of Pennsylvania.

often dealt in new technologies that required demonstration and promotion. Some decided that an agricultural paper could make for an effective marketing vehicle. Thus, for instance, Donald Marti characterizes the first *New England Farmer* as an “advertising arm” of the New England Warehouse and Seed Store and notes that Philadelphia’s *Farmer’s Cabinet* “did a great deal of writing and speaking on behalf of the Prouty Centre Draught Plough.” Conversely, sometimes agricultural editors themselves moved into the production and distribution of seeds, implements and the like, as James J. Mapes of the *Working Farmer* did when he joined a partnership to manufacture artificial fertilizer. Segmentation in the print market, therefore, drew on wider development of the agricultural sector. While many in the farm press had migrated from politics horizontally to agriculture, others moved vertically from making and selling agricultural implements to making and selling agricultural words.²⁷

As the farm press gained a firmer foothold, editors coupled direct appeals to farmers with increasingly sophisticated efforts to build broad public support for the agricultural reform project. Their growing discursive authority formed one key to their success. By publishing a steady stream of material that addressed the same basic themes of soil maintenance, market orientation, and technological innovation, the editors crafted a discourse of “scientific agriculture” that resonated in the public sphere, not least because both major dailies and county papers frequently reprinted such material. Farm editors and expert contributors shared a broad frame of reference however much they disagreed with one another on technical details. As echoes of their views found their way into general media, the underlying premises of agricultural reform acquired a quality of accepted truth independent of any particular source. In the realm of “public opinion,” the idea that agriculture required reform and improvement began to appear noncontroversial. The discourse of agricultural reform had come to speak on its own authority.

Concrete networks of committed reformers provided the foundations of this discursive authority. Farm journal offices emerged almost immediately as important nodes for linking and

²⁷ Marti, *To Improve the Soil and the Mind*, 128, 148; Demaree, *The American Agricultural Press, 1819-1860*, 46–47, 57, 143; Richard A. Wines, *Fertilizer in America: From Waste Recycling to Resource Exploitation* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1985), 99–102. For the period’s changing agricultural economy, see Clarence H. Danhof, *Change in Agriculture: The Northern United States, 1820-1870* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969); Christopher Clark, *The Roots of Rural Capitalism: Western Massachusetts, 1780-1860* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990); Peter D. McClelland, *Sowing Modernity: America’s First Agricultural Revolution* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); Alan L. Olmstead and Paul Webb Rhode, *Creating Abundance: Biological Innovation and American Agricultural Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Sally McMurry, *Families and Farmhouses in Nineteenth-Century America: Vernacular Design and Social Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

building these networks. As early as 1837, the *Cultivator* reported receiving twenty inquiries in only two days regarding specific varieties of seeds, implements and livestock. Because editorial staffs tended to reply by referring farmers to nurserymen, stock breeders, implement dealers, seed distributors and other reform-minded farmers, they established ties among those most interested in agricultural improvement. At the same time, editors initiated contact with postmasters and solicited local agents to manage groups of subscribers. In some cases, higher-order “special agents” coordinated the local subscription managers. Moreover, since different editors not only reprinted each other’s material but also acted as each other’s local agents, their lists of contacts overlapped. Thus even a small journal like the *Practical Farmer*, run by a committee of utterly middling Pennsylvania farmers, could circulate a survey through the assistance of its “brethren of the ‘Corps Editorial’.”²⁸ In these ways, editors came to occupy strategic points within the extended agricultural reform network.²⁹

To sum up, the careers of early agricultural editors reveal two patterns: on the one hand, a background in the partisan political press, especially leading back to the efforts of Democratic-Republican printers to expand white men’s political prerogatives; on the other hand, commercial motives deriving from specialization within both print and the larger capitalist economy. Together, these patterns conditioned agricultural journalism’s emergence as a distinct periodical niche and lent it a programmatic tone of vernacular improvement. These same patterns also positioned editors as central players in pushing the agricultural reform agenda forward.

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During the 1830s and 1840s, agricultural editors began to seriously mobilize reform networks in the interests of renewing state subsidies to agricultural societies. New York’s editors were probably the first to do so. Their campaign yielded results in 1841, when the legislature voted to provide the state’s agricultural societies with \$8,000 in annual funding. As in the early 1820s, these appropriations came in the midst of a severe economic downturn. Unlike the earlier

²⁸ *Cultivator* 4 (Mar 1837): 28; *Practical Farmer* (Mechanicsburg, PA) 1 (Sep 1838): 266; Jeremy Fisher, “Improving the Soil and Mind: The Geography of The Cultivator” (M.A., Pennsylvania State University, 2008), 51–60; Philip Mills Herrington, “The Exceptional Plantation: Slavery, Agricultural Reform, and the Creation of an American Landscape” (Ph.D., University of Virginia, 2012), 12; Demaree, *The American Agricultural Press, 1819-1860*, 57.

²⁹ For the antebellum postal system as an ever-available network that altered Americans’ sense of their connections to each other across vast distances, see David M. Henkin, *The Postal Age: The Emergence of Modern Communications in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2006).

phase, however, the funding was never rescinded. Instead, the reach and influence of agricultural journals and societies continued to grow in subsequent years and, as a result, the state gradually increased its fiscal support in various ways. Looking at the New York case in detail will illustrate the general trajectory that seems to have characterized developments in other states as well.

The campaign for the 1841 law began a decade earlier when Samuel Fleet, editor of the *New York Farmer*, issued an appeal for a state agricultural convention. Tucker's *Genesee Farmer* soon echoed the call. As Donald Marti observes, "the attempt to re-establish agricultural societies would be supported by a vigorous agricultural press."³⁰

The convention first met in Albany in 1832. Among the delegates was William Seward, then a state senator, who would prove a critical ally when he became governor in 1839. Other prominent delegates included the Anti-Masonic Party's gubernatorial nominee, Francis Granger. The delegates established a state agricultural society as a coordinating body for county societies. The latter were largely theoretical; only one actually existed. Over the next few years, plans were laid to create such organizations in several counties, but few got off the ground for lack of funding.³¹

The state agricultural convention continued to meet and to agitate for renewed public subsidies. In 1834, after the governor supported the idea in his annual message but the legislature did nothing, Lewis F. Allen, a Buffalo land developer who had gotten into the nursery and stock-raising business, led a protest by the "friends of agriculture." Later that year, when the senate agriculture committee rejected subsidies on the grounds that the Clintonian Board of Agriculture had been a wasteful failure, Luther Tucker published a series of articles in the *Genesee Farmer* offering point-by-point rebuttals. The real issue, according to Tucker and others, was that agricultural reform served no specific partisan agenda. It was therefore easily cast aside to the detriment of the public interest.

Party programs and ideological commitments did matter. Although the ranks of agricultural reform supporters included both Whigs and Democrats, opposition to publicly funded agri-

³⁰ Marti, "Early Agricultural Societies in New York," 324.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 324–327 (quotation on 324); Marti, *To Improve the Soil and the Mind*, 49–58; Lewis F. Allen, *Address Delivered before the New-York State Agricultural Society; at the Capitol, in the City of Albany, on the Evening of the 18th January, 1849* (Albany: Weed, Parsons and Company, 1849), 7–12. *Journal of the Assembly of the State of New-York*, 64th sess. (Albany: 1841), 740; Marti, *To Improve the Soil and the Mind*, 49–58; *Transactions of the New York State Agricultural Society* 1 (1842): 5–15.

cultural societies tended to come from hardline, small-government Jacksonian Democrats. Reformers continued the pressure, getting up petitions, writing editorials and lobbying in Albany. But the breakthrough only came after 1838, when Whigs took control of the state government.

Lewis Allen anticipated the shift when he introduced a bill for agricultural subsidies in February 1838. Allen was already a key figure in virtually every phase of agricultural reform, particularly on the business side. He or his brothers would eventually come to run a nursery, breed improved stock, and manufacture plows, in addition to authoring books on everything from rural architecture to proper horse care. Throughout the 1830s, Allen had been a regular contributor to Tucker's *Genesee Farmer*, writing under the pseudonym "Ulmus." In 1842, his brothers, Anthony and Richard, founded their own farm journal, the *American Agriculturist*, as a marketing channel for their growing business.³²

The Allens thought in broad developmental terms. They exemplified agricultural reform's commercial and utilitarian orientation. Lewis, the most politically connected of the group, pursued two related policy goals: expansion of the state's internal improvements and of its agricultural reform initiatives. He believed both essential to developing the unlimited agricultural potential of western New York and the region between the Great Lakes and the Ohio River. As he explained in an 1838 report for the New York Assembly, "agriculture constitutes the broad base upon which the whole superstructure of society depends." This reflected the Allen brothers' hardnosed utilitarianism. Years later Richard Allen advised his son "to look thoroughly to the substructure, the foundations of society, on which the whole superstructure is based. . . . See all that is attractive, but treasure up for future use only what is useful."³³

³² Lewis Falley Allen to William Henry Seward, 16 Nov 1838, Reel 6, William Henry Seward Papers on microfilm. On Allen and his brothers, see entries in ACLS, *Dictionary of American Biography*, I:185-186, 201, 205-206; H. Perry Smith, ed., "Lewis F. Allen," in *History of the City of Buffalo and Erie County, with Illustrations and Biographical Sketches of Some of Its Prominent Men and Pioneers*, vol. 1 (Syracuse, NY: D. Mason & Co., 1884), 701-8; Richard Lamb Allen, *Last Letters of Richard L. Allen* (New York: Dodd & Mead, 1871). For Lewis F. Allen as "Ulmus," see Marti, *To Improve the Soil and the Mind*, 50. The Allens' books include Lewis F. Allen, *Rural Architecture Being a Complete Description of Farmhouse, Cottages, and Outbuildings* (New York: C.M. Saxton, 1852); Richard Lamb Allen, *The American Farm Book or Compend of American Agriculture; Being a Practical Treatise on Soils, Manures, Draining, Irrigation, Grasses, Grain, Roots, Fruits* (N. Y.: C. M. Saxon, 1850); John Stewart and A. B. Allen, *Stable Economy: A Treatise on the Management of Horses, in Relation to Stabling, Grooming, Feeding, Watering, and Working*, From the 3rd English edition with notes and additions adapting it to American food and climate, by A.B. Allen (New York: Appleton, 1845); Richard Lamb Allen, *Domestic Animals: History and Description of the Horse, Mule, Cattle, Sheep, Swine, Poultry, and Farm Dogs, with Directions for Their Management, Breeding, Crossing, Rearing, Feeding, and Preparation for a Profitable Market* (New York: O. Judd company, 1847).

³³ Doc. No. 161, 10 Feb 1838, *Documents of the Assembly of the State of New-York, Sixty-First Session* (Albany: E. Crosswell, 1838), vol. 4, p. 1; Allen, *Last Letters of Richard L. Allen*, 57. For Allen's favoring of internal improvements, see the letter cited above and Lewis Falley Allen to John Alsop King, 10 Nov 1860, Box 2, John Alsop King Papers, New-York Historical Society. Allen's vision for the west is laid out in "Letter from Ulmus," *Genesee Farmer* 7 (14 Jan 1837): 12.

Although Lewis Allen introduced the bill accompanying his report too late in the session to bring it to a vote, Seward's gubernatorial election in the fall indicated success was just ahead. Allen immediately wrote to urge the governor-elect to favor subsidies for agricultural societies. It was "a subject of paramount importance in promoting the wealth and prosperity of our state," he averred. Moreover, it was "popular with the people."³⁴

Jesse Buel echoed these efforts, deploying the political skills he had once honed as a partisan editor.³⁵ In the pages of the *Cultivator*, Buel published essays calling for "patronage to agriculture." At the same time, he lobbied Seward personally. Meeting with him sometime in December, Buel urged re-establishing the Board of Agriculture. In a follow-up letter, he informed Seward that he and other agricultural reformers had distributed several hundred petition forms, which would soon be raining down on the legislature. "Pardon me for saying," he concluded, "that I consider this branch of labor . . . merits the fostering care of government and that it must ultimately *command* it."³⁶

This was a kind of not-so-veiled threat. Farmers, Buel reminded the ambitious politician, comprised a majority of the electorate. But that bare fact meant little. The question was whether the farmers were awake to their interests, or rather, to their interests as determined by the likes of Buel and Allen. For this reason Buel enclosed the latest issue of the *Cultivator*, in which Seward could peruse such pieces as "Serious Suggestions Addressed to the Interests and Honor of Farmers." The point here was not merely to forward a set of persuasive arguments, but to call attention to those arguments' publicity. Buel was inviting Seward to imagine thousands of farmers reading Buel's appeal, to participate in the "mass ceremony" of the imagined farmers' community and then to re-imagine the farmers as the electorate at the polls. Allen played a similar game. He assured Seward that "to a vast many" farmers, the bill he proposed "would be most welcome." Meanwhile he sent letters to the *Genesee Farmer* declaring that "farmers have only to will it and they can COMMAND all the sources of improvement." In the latter case, it was farmers themselves who were invited to imagine their massed numbers.³⁷

³⁴ Lewis Falley Allen to William Henry Seward, 16 Nov 1838, Reel 6, William Henry Seward Papers on microfilm.

³⁵ It is worth noting that in 1836 Buel had been the Whig candidate for governor in a campaign all had understood to be doomed. With Martin Van Buren heading the presidential ticket, the Democrats swept New York easily.

³⁶ Charles Strong, "Patronage to Agriculture," *Cultivator* 5 (October 1838): 141; Jesse Buel to William Henry Seward, 26 Dec 1838, Reel 7, William Henry Seward Papers on microfilm (emphasis in original).

³⁷ "Serious Suggestions Addressed to the Interests and Honor of Farmers," *Cultivator* 5 (December 1838): 169; Lewis Falley Allen to William Henry Seward, 16 Nov 1838, Reel 6, William Henry Seward Papers on microfilm; "Letter from

Although Radical Democrats' lingering control in the state senate stymied reformers' efforts a little while longer, sweeping Whig victories in the 1840 elections assured ultimate success. The Whigs' triumph related closely to the depressed economic situation. The country had just suffered the second of two major financial panics in rapid succession. By effectively fusing attacks on Jacksonian banking policy with a populist campaigning style, the Whigs won the presidency and control of many state governments.³⁸ Not only in New York, but also in Ohio, Connecticut and elsewhere, Whig legislatures reestablished public funding for agricultural societies.³⁹

It might seem, then, that the renewal owed more to the Whig program of state-sponsored economic development than to agricultural reformers' own efforts. This is partly a matter of perspective, but in my view, the Whigs' agency should not be emphasized. To be sure, Whigs tended to be friendlier to government agricultural subsidies than Democrats, but they never campaigned on the issue nor included it in their platforms. Moreover, many agricultural reformers, such as Luther Tucker, remained Democrats. The economic downturn that brought the Whigs to power and gave them a popular mandate to enact economic reforms provided the occasion for renewing agricultural subsidies, but it was the farm press's multi-pronged lobbying campaign that brought agricultural reform back onto the public agenda to begin with. And it was the farm press's nonpartisan pose that presented the issue as if it were simply a matter of common sense policy in the public interest. /

Thanks to the renewal of public aid, agricultural societies revived. County societies that had previously existed only on paper took on real existence by organizing popular annual fairs. State fairs became grand events at which politicians appeared regularly. This time, reformers avoided the obvious elitism of the 1820s. As a result, their stature grew until they were able to

Ulmus," *Genesee Farmer* 7 (14 Jan 1837): 12 (emphasis in original). "Imagined farmers' community" references Benedict R. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 35. The analytic approach in this paragraph derives from David M. Henkin, *City Reading: Written Words and Public Spaces in Antebellum New York* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

³⁸ Jabez Delano Hammond, *The History of Political Parties in the State of New-York: From the Ratification of the Federal Constitution to December, 1840* (C. Van Benthuysen, 1844), 2:528; Marti, "Early Agricultural Societies in New York," 327; Michael F. Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party: Jacksonian Politics and the Onset of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 78, 89–90, 111–12; Jessica M. Lepler, *The Many Panics of 1837: People, Politics, and the Creation of a Transatlantic Financial Crisis* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

³⁹ Ariel Ron, "Summoning the State: Northern Farmers and the Transformation of American Politics in the Mid-Nineteenth Century," forthcoming in the *Journal of American History*.

organize nationally to pressure Congress in favor of an “agricultural college bill” (the Morrill Land Grant Act) and creation of the Department of Agriculture.

The agricultural press continued to rise, too. By the 1850s, Tucker’s *Country Gentleman* and the Allens’ *American Agriculturist*, which had absorbed a number of smaller journals, enjoyed circulations above 40,000. Both had also begun to expand the scope of their activities by sponsoring scientific experiments, distributing seeds, and conducting consumer protection campaigns focused on the quality of newly available artificial fertilizers. At the same time, they continued to provide an essential public forum for agricultural reformers to work out ideas, forge a collective “agricultural interest,” and influence public policy.⁴⁰

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The rise of the agricultural press should lead us to rethink two frameworks of antebellum history. The first concerns farmers’ supposed traditionalism. The second, the scope of the public sphere.

Historians still tend to reach reflexively for a kind of timeless agrarian ideal as expressed in Crevecoeur’s sentimental *Letters from an American Farmer* and Jefferson’s dictum that “those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God.”⁴¹ This is all well and good, but it is not what appeared in the agricultural press, which ordinary farmers most certainly did read.⁴² Agricultural editors fused the early republic’s gentry ideal of patriotic improvement with the yeoman ideal of propertied independence to frame a new discourse predicated on economic nationalism, “business principles” and “scientific agriculture,” but also on a budding conservationist ethos, new forms of sociability and a renegotiation of the intra-familial division of labor and authority.⁴³ None of this precluded nostalgic representations of “the old homestead” or frequent appeals

⁴⁰ Demaree, *The American Agricultural Press, 1819-1860*, 348–55; Marti, *To Improve the Soil and the Mind*, 162; Marti, “Agricultural Journalism and the Diffusion of Knowledge.”

⁴¹ Edwin C. Hagenstein, Sara M. Gregg, and Brian Donahue, eds., *American Georgics: Writings on Farming, Culture, and the Land* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 1, 15–27. For two recent monographs that link the traditional version of agrarianism to the sectional politics of the 1850s, see James L. Huston, *The British Gentry, the Southern Planter, and the Northern Family Farmer: Agriculture and Sectional Antagonism in North America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2015); Adam Wesley Dean, *An Agrarian Republic: Farming, Antislavery Politics, and Nature Parks in the Civil War Era* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2015).

⁴² Sally McMurry, “Who Read the Agricultural Journals? Evidence from Chenango County, New York, 1839-1865,” *Agricultural History* 63 (Autumn 1989): 1–18; Ariel Ron, “Developing the Country: ‘Scientific Agriculture’ and the Roots of the Republican Party” (Ph.D., University of California, Berkeley, 2012), 37, 221.

⁴³ See, especially, Sally McMurry, *Transforming Rural Life: Dairying Families and Agricultural Change, 1820-1885* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); Sally McMurry, “Progressive Farm Families and Their Houses, 1830-1855: A Study in Independent Design,” *Agricultural History* 58 (June 1984): 330–46; Mary Babson Fuhrer, *A Crisis of Community: The Trials and Transformation of a New England Town, 1815-1848* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press,

to what we might today call “traditional values” associated with the heteronormative white family farm. But these should be analyzed as strategically deployable tropes rather than taken at face value.

The agricultural press was nothing if not modern in form and content. When, for instance, the Allen brothers decided to publish the *American Agriculturist*, they did so in New York City despite misgivings about the urban setting, because that was in fact the best way to reach *many* rural people. Many-ness is the pertinent attribute here. In addressing an abstract agricultural public and gradually bringing it into some kind of actual existence, the farm press fundamentally changed what it meant to be a farmer and redrew the imagined edges of the rural community.

Moreover, both the explicit and implicit views peddled by the agricultural press bore little resemblance to Jefferson’s vision of an independent yeomanry bidding defiance to the world. Land ownership remained central, of course, but *inter*-dependence better characterized reformers’ perspectives than *in*-dependence. Thus Lewis Allen insisted that farmers promote the cause of scientific agriculture “by *association*,” as other “professions” promoted their own particular interests. “Individual effort cannot do it,” he insisted.⁴⁴ Here Allen projected a clear vision of a pluralist polity in which numerous well-organized special interests, rather than localities governed by elaborate patron-client hierarchies, jockeyed for a piece of the state.

These structural and organizational aspects were mirrored in agricultural reform ideology, which more closely resembled what Gabriel N. Rosenberg has recently characterized as the late nineteenth century’s “agrarian futurism” than Crevecoeur’s winsome rustic simplicity. Rosenberg puts the point well when he writes:

Historians have cataloged the influence of agrarian ideas, language, and politics in the American past but have tended to characterize agrarians as antimodernists—individuals on the margins of American political culture dedicated to protecting a vanishing agricultural past from an encroaching urban, industrial future. By con-

2014); Martin Bruegel, *Farm, Shop, Landing: The Rise of a Market Society in the Hudson Valley, 1780-1860* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002); Huston, *Land and Freedom*; Steven Stoll, *Larding the Lean Earth: Soil and Society in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002); Clark, *Roots of Rural Capitalism*; David Lowenthal, *George Perkins Marsh, Prophet of Conservation* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000).

⁴⁴ “Letter from Ulmus,” 12 (emphasis in original).

trast, American agricultural expansion often produced agrarianism that was radically modernist and futurist in its orientation and that enjoyed powerful influence in centers of government well into the twentieth century.⁴⁵

We will need to get a grip on the modernizing sensibilities of antebellum agricultural reformers in order to make sense of the stories that Rosenberg and others are telling about the gilded and progressive eras. This is already happening in recent, highly original work on antebellum agricultural science and capitalism. Yet given the immense documentary record that agricultural reformers left behind—much of it little explored and even unknown—there remains plenty more to learn.⁴⁶

The payoff here is not only a much-needed rethinking of agrarian ideology that moves beyond our classic declension story pivoting on the “market revolution.” It is also a reconsideration of the forms, contents and boundaries of the nineteenth-century public sphere. Here we remain subtly enthralled by the long-standing historiographical tradition, common to Marxists and modernizationists alike, of regarding urbanization and the Industrial Revolution (capital “I,” capital “R”) as *the story* of the nineteenth century. I say subtly because the discipline has obviously moved away from making the IR the central thing-to-be-explained. But our histories remain colored by the presumption that early American urbanism and industrialization heralded the significant part of the American future. True, urban ways of life and industrial labor conditions eventually came to dominate, but not before more than a century in which rural communities and the wider agricultural sector pursued their own modernity and, in the process, prescribed key terms on which the rest of us have come to inhabit ours.

⁴⁵ Rosenberg, *The 4-H Harvest*, 12.

⁴⁶ For farmers as moderns, see, in addition to Rosenberg cited above, Charles Postel, *The Populist Vision* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). For agriculture in antebellum science and capitalism, see Emily Pawley, “The Point of Perfection: Cattle Portraiture, Bloodlines, and the Meaning of Breeding, 1760-1860,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 36 (Spring 2016): 37–72; Pawley, Emily, “Reading the Man of Signs, Or, Farming in the Moon,” *Common-Place* 14 (Summer 2014), <http://www.common-place-archives.org/vol-14/no-04/notes/>; Emily Pawley, “Accounting with the Fields: Chemistry and Value in Nutrient in American Agricultural Improvement, 1835–1860,” *Science as Culture* 19 (December 2010): 461–82; Courtney Fullilove, “The Archive of Useful Knowledge” (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 2009).

To cite just one pertinent example, recent work shows how experts at the U.S. Department of Agriculture became forward agents of American empire from the early twentieth century.⁴⁷ Yet this sort of thing has a deeper history than we tend to realize. In 1871, the agricultural improver Horace Capron arrived in Japan to oversee the new Meiji government's agricultural development policy. Capron, who headed the USDA in the first Grant administration, was a champion rancher whose name litters the pages of antebellum agricultural societies' official reports. From his headquarters in Tokyo, he advised on the creation of agricultural experiment stations, agricultural colleges, and Japan's agricultural expansion into Hokkaido which, among other things, resulted in the extermination of the island's wolf population and radical changes in the diets of ordinary Japanese throughout the archipelago. A century and a half later, New York City's best restaurants advertise Kobe beef on their menus.⁴⁸

But the rise of the antebellum farm press does more than remind us that, as ought to be obvious, agriculture matters. It alerts us to a broader class of developments growing out of the period's flood of print discourse. For instance, it suggests something of the general consequences of segmentation in the print market. Many antebellum Americans made it a point to receive two periodicals: the regular newspaper bearing general news of the day and a more specialized paper of some kind, say, an abolitionist sheet, an agricultural journal, a workers' daily, a woman's magazine. Such a practice perforce created sub-publics in various relations to the general or national public. These relations can be classified and located within specific sets of conditions. More importantly, they can be shown to have grounded certain kinds of ostensibly general claims. In the case I examine in this essay, for example, studied nonpartisanship in the agricultural press grounded claims to represent a discrete farmer class and also to represent objective expertise emanating from the certainties of natural science.

⁴⁷ Immerwahr, *Thinking Small*, 44–47, 50–56; Nick Cullather, *The Hungry World: America's Cold War Battle Against Poverty in Asia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

⁴⁸ Brett L. Walker, *The Lost Wolves of Japan* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005), 137–142 and throughout; Earle D. Ross, "The United States Department of Agriculture during the Commissionership: A Study in Politics, Administration, and Technology, 1862-1889," *Agricultural History* 20 (June 1946): 134.